

Herodotus and the Persian Wars: memory, recrimination and the writing of history

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The Persian Wars were a defining event in Greek history, and Greek cities made much of the part they played in them. Rosalind Thomas takes a long hard look at how story became history.

First the celebration, then the history

The history of the Persian Wars was not only narrated by Herodotus in his *Histories*. The wars were remembered with immense pride in a wide range of ways, by the victorious Greeks. Memorials were erected both in individual cities and at the panhellenic sanctuary of Delphi; the victorious cities were listed on the famous Serpent Column at Delphi; and a recently-discovered papyrus with a poem by Simonides about the battle of Plataia treats the combatants as heroes on a par with the great heroes of Greek mythology. The fragments of Simonides' poem declare that those who fought in the war will have

'undying fame', 'leaving the Eurotas and the city of Sparta, accompanied by Zeus' horsemaster sons, [the Tyndarid] heroes and by Menelaos' strength, the leaders of their ancestral city'.

The Spartans who fought at Plataia are here placed in a direct line with ancient Spartan heroes, including Menelaos, husband of Helen of Troy, marching out from Sparta in their company. Soon after the victory, the victors were being accorded an extraordinary almost Homeric status.

The importance of the conflict probably encouraged the first recognisable history-writing, by offering a recent achievement just as worthy of narration as the poets' standard legendary subjects. Herodotus opened his *Histories*, written around half a century after the Wars, by declaring that this was his *historiê* (literally 'enquiry'), written so that 'the achievements of men should not become forgotten with time, and that the great and wonderful deeds, displayed by both Greeks and barbarians, should not be without fame (*aklea*); and

especially to show for what reason (*aitiê*) they fought with each other'. Particularly significant here are the echoes of Homer: in Herodotus' hope that achievements should not be forgotten, without fame (*kleos*), he alludes to the Homeric poet's idea that the heroes gained *kleos* by their great deeds, but that immortality for that *kleos* really needed poetry. But alongside this, the radical claim to conduct an enquiry (*historiê*) indicates a more contemporary aim.

Herodotus' aims

For Herodotus' *Histories* did not simply celebrate and praise. Undercurrents and tensions in his account of the Wars attest to a more complicated reconstruction in his work; even that he constructed his narrative against, or in tension with, the praise poetry. Thucydides, who wrote slightly later about the later war between Athens and Sparta, was forthright about disbelieving the poets (1.21), but Herodotus was quietly inventing a way to create a critical narrative. His narrative offers alternative twists, malicious stories, competing claims of different cities. He was later accused of deliberately undermining the Greek achievement by Plutarch, writing around A.D. 100 once nostalgia had hardened the Persian Wars into the supreme Greek achievement. But does a historian just give the cheerful, upbeat version?

Writing about the past is never simple, and even before Herodotus started researching there were competing versions of what had actually happened – alongside Simonides' poem we have Aeschylus' dramatic version in the earliest surviving tragedy, *The Persians*, first performed in Athens in 472 B.C. Each city had its particular self-centred perspective (we might compare the D-Day landings of

the Second World War, and the way each nation tends to concentrate upon its own troops). The achievements of each city in the Wars had become status-symbols. Herodotus' hope to prevent oblivion was therefore far more than a bland statement that 'men forget'. It alludes also to the fact that the Persian Wars were being manipulated and re-formed according to later priorities and politics, and that there was an urgent need to set down a reliable account.

The shadow of the present in Herodotus' Wars

Herodotus aimed for a wider Greek audience. Striking problems assailed the historian trying to construct an account even of events which took place within living memory, but almost two generations ago. He was writing until just after the start of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). Events and politics had moved on, relations between the Greek cities had deteriorated and the panhellenic alliance between Sparta, Athens, and Corinth and others had disintegrated by the 460s. The Athenian 'Delian League' had grown out of the tail-end of the Persian Wars; based on tribute and ships, it soon coerced allies. Athenians justified it because they had done most to defeat the Persians. Well might a Greek in the 430s recall the Persian Wars wistfully and wonder how so many Greek states had united to defeat the Persians.

Book 8 of Herodotus' *Histories* offers a rich study for examining the ways in which Herodotus' narrative betrays – even invites – thoughts about Greek affairs after the Wars through hints, ironies, and allusions to the re-forming of memories in the light of later events. What we are dealing with is not an issue of 'bias' (e.g. Herodotus being 'pro-Athenian'), but of the mutability of memories and the difficulty of handling accounts that were hard to verify after so many years. Herodotus' informants had variously slanted memories and accounts. His own presentation added another layer of interpretation and

emphasis; later events might encourage a different balance in the narrative.

It is in this context that we can best understand the extraordinary twists in Herodotus' account of how the Greeks were persuaded to fight in the bay of Salamis where their superior naval skills and inferior numbers were to their advantage in the confined space between the island and the Attic mainland. The combination of persuasion, threats, and outright trickery by the Athenian commander Themistocles hardly evoke Greek patriotism. Herodotus describes how he first tried the hard-nosed strategic argument, while carefully avoiding previous arguments about the danger of the Greek forces dispersing if they retreated to the Isthmus (8. 58–60), but he was attacked by the Corinthian commander Adeimantus as a landless exile (61), and threatened to withdraw the Athenians altogether (62).

In the finely persuasive speech Herodotus gives him, Themistocles promised the preservation of 'Megara, Aegina, and Salamis' if they followed his strategy (60); this might have struck later audiences ironically, for in 446 Aegina's autonomy was seriously reduced, and by 431 the Athenians had destroyed her independence, expelled the inhabitants, and taken over the island on the grounds that Aegina had caused the war. Megara too was treated harshly by the Athenians who imposed on the Megarians a trade embargo from the whole Athenian empire in the lead-up to the war of 431. One might see ironies; and perhaps Herodotus was hinting at a more idealistic Greece. He was also showing the instability and fluidity of fine rhetoric.

Whose malice?

It was a duplicitous message sent by Themistocles to the Persians, urging the Persians to block the escape routes, which finally forced the Greeks to fight in the bay of Salamis. Hardly a courageous tale. But where did Herodotus get the account of secret messages to the Persians? From Themistocles himself? From others? No wonder other Greeks wondered later about Themistocles' loyalty. In his account of the battle itself, Herodotus records that the bravest fighting was attributed to the Aeginetans, and the second-best to the Athenians. Aegina's hostility to the Athenians before 480 was notorious, yet here they were the best (8.93.1) – another sad irony given the Aeginetans' complete destruction at the hands of the Athenians within barely two generations. At this point Herodotus added perhaps the most disturbing paragraph in the whole Salamis account (8.94): the Athenians said that the Corinthian commander Adeimantus was seized by panic and fled, followed by the

other Corinthian ships; but they were met by a mysterious boat at Athena's temple. They realized that the ship was divinely sent, and returned to the battle. What is (or was) going on here? Herodotus concludes that it was an Athenian story which the Corinthians 'do not agree with', and they think they were among the first in the sea-battle, 'and the rest of Greece bears witness to this'. So this is a malicious tale put about solely by the Athenians. Why does Herodotus put it here? Herodotus did not need to include an antagonistic story which few believed.

Herodotus says he lacks detail about the fighting (7.87.1), but there is no doubt that the Corinthians took part, as inscriptions of the time confirm – there was a grave for Corinthians on Salamis. We must suspect that Herodotus thought the accusation was important enough to be both included and clearly denied. But the accusation leaves a somewhat sour taste: a mean Athenian accusation of cowardice. It is significant that Corinth was the naval power Athenians were to fight in the 450s, and her allies were seriously threatened by Athenian expansion in the 430s. Elsewhere Herodotus stated that he was bound 'to tell what is said', but was 'not obliged to believe it' (7.152.3), but he did not simply repeat tales indiscriminately. Besides, he does not say in the first person that he disbelieves the Athenians, but more weightily, 'the rest of Greece bears witness'. So we suspect that the rest of Greece is here bearing witness also to the later deterioration in relations between Athens and Corinth and the resulting distortion of the past. Adeimantus' son, though an ambassador, was later executed by the Athenians when they found him on a Peloponnesian embassy to Persia (Hdt. 7.137.3). This is a fine example of the way Herodotus' narrative may seem neutral, simple, but its subtlety reveals how accounts of the Persian Wars were becoming deformed.

Themistocles and the rewriting of history

In Herodotus' account Themistocles' actions after the Salamis victory are also heavily loaded. He gives a long-drawn-out discussion about the bridge over the Hellespont, Xerxes' fears that it would be destroyed by the Greeks, and the Greeks debating whether to leave it, or destroy it and trap Xerxes on the European side (8. 97–117). Always the superb operator, Themistocles first urged that they all sail to the Hellespont straightaway and destroy the bridge, but most Greek commanders argued the opposite, and so Themistocles shifted ground. There are hints of later incomprehension and gossip here: Herodotus makes the surprising claim that Themistocles was preparing the

ground to claim a favour from Xerxes later if necessary and so sent a message to Xerxes claiming credit for the bridge not having been destroyed (109–10). Herodotus' readers knew that Themistocles later took refuge with the Persian king. It is something of an anticlimax when we hear that the Persians reached the Hellespont to find that storms had destroyed the bridges anyway (117), yet they still managed to cross. This trouble-free crossing sets in relief the way Herodotus imagined and narrated considerable discussion on the matter: this whole story was enlarged in the light of later events.

About the same time the Greeks besieged the island of Andros because it had medized, and as Herodotus put it, 'The Andrians were the first of the islanders to refuse Themistocles' demand for money' (8. 111 f.). They refused because of poverty. This is a significant early example of the way anti-Persian military action became mixed up with demands for money, the latter not always clearly linked to the former. It can be no coincidence that the Andrians would recall this episode, and Herodotus tell it, in this loaded manner. Already immediately after Salamis, Themistocles was beginning to behave in the way that became familiar from Athens during her leadership of the Delian League. 'Meanwhile Themistocles, always greedy for money, sent demands to the other islands'; Paros and Carystos paid up, and the other commanders knew nothing of these payments (112). Themistocles was in some ways emblematic of Athenian character as other Greeks experienced it later in the fifth century. The subtle shades of emphasis in Herodotus' narrative here hint at the Athenian Empire to come.

As we study the Greek accounts of the Persian Wars several layers of interpretation are revealed: poetic eulogies, stories of local pride, later disappointments and counter-accusations; the Persian Wars became part of a web of aspirations, ideals, and disillusionment as later events unfolded. Herodotus' account was both a work of careful research and a presentation well aware of the later fragmentation of Greek unity: both a work of *historiê* and of history.

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